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RECENT PSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE REALM OF RELIGION.

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TO MANY ministers today the word "psychology" conveys no very definite meaning; for until comparatively recent years no such subject was taught in our colleges. Students perused in its place that dignified mixture of metaphysical argument and sagacious logic which bore the name "mental philosophy." The scope of this philosophy was indicated by the title of that classic work, Porter's *Human Intellect*. Knowledge was regarded as the supreme achievement of man; and "mental philosophy" undertook to set forth the correct processes of knowledge, and to guard against fallacies and illusions. The psychologist of today is wont to describe this older science by the word "intellectualism," in contrast to the modern emphasis upon feeling and willing.

The tacit presupposition of this intellectualism was the conviction that correct knowledge would furnish to the mind of man an accurate reproduction of reality as it exists in itself. The psychological problem involved consisted in ascertaining the mental machinery by which this reproduction was accomplished. The mind was regarded primarily as an information bureau where tidings from the non-mental world could be received. Consequently, the processes of sensation, perception, conception, etc., were of fundamental interest; the problem always being to show that through these processes reliable information could be obtained.

Evidently a "mental philosophy" of this kind would be interested, so far as religion is concerned, primarily in the doctrines which theology put forth concerning the natural and the supernatural world. It would attempt to test the validity of these doctrines. The results of such testing were as diverse as were the metaphysical presuppositions of the philosophers. The disciples of Hume, for example, could find no valid reason for accepting current theological doctrines.

Hence skepticism or agnosticism was the prevailing attitude of the empirical psychology. On the other hand, teachers of philosophy in professedly Christian colleges, building usually upon the "common-sense" realism of the Scottish philosophers, pointed out the inconsistencies of agnosticism, and showed valid reasons for trusting the conclusions of natural theology.

Modern psychology, in contrast to this mental philosophy, is concerned not so much with the problem of knowledge as with the problem of psychic life as a manifestation of personal activity. It rests upon the researches of men like Helmholtz and Wundt, whose prime object was to investigate the relation between the physiological and the psychic activities. That is, attention has been shifted from the problem of mind as a reporter of supposed external reality to the problem of mind as an aspect of biological activity. The significance of psychic activity is sought not so much in relation to external reality as in relation to the vital functions of personal life. Whereas for the older mental philosophy ideas were regarded as intellectual pictures of reality as such, for modern psychology ideas are means by which personal life expresses its inherent vitality. For example, one of the favorite fields of investigation for modern psychologists is the mental life of children. The child's ideas are different from the ideas of an adult. The older psychology explained these differences on the theory that the child had not been sufficiently educated in mental philosophy. The newer psychology explains them by showing that the life of the child is different from the life of the adult, and therefore expresses itself in different psychic forms.

Perhaps the new psychology is most strikingly contrasted with the old in the assurance with which it is investigating the phenomena of subconscious mentality. For the older intellectualism the fundamental object of investigation was the field of clear, exact consciousness. If the prime purpose be the exhibition of the validity of our knowledge, then the clearest, most exact ideas and perceptions will yield the most satisfactory results. To expect to find accurate knowledge in dreams or in trances or in hypnotic states would be manifestly absurd. Our modern psychologist, on the contrary, feels that this subliminal consciousness is a most important object of investigation, because here we have a correlation between life and psychic activity

which is not obscured by our somewhat arbitrary rational processes. He feels that until we have included this automatic expression of the soul's life in our science we have a very inadequate description of psychic activity. Thus in recent times the phenomena of hypnotism, of clairvoyance, of trance, of spiritualism, and similar occult manifestations have been carefully investigated in the hope of gaining some new insight into the laws of mental life.

From what has been said, it is evident that the new psychology will assume an attitude toward religion quite different from that taken by the older mental philosophy. It is interested in the content of psychic experience as an expression of the soul's life, not as a description of external reality. It therefore proceeds to seize upon exactly those aspects of religious experience which science formerly avoided because they could not be fitted into a rational metaphysics.¹

The earliest attempt to employ the new psychological method in matters of vital religious concern was made by the Society for Psychical Research, organized in England in 1882 with Professor Henry Sidgwick as president. In 1885 the American branch was organized. In both England and America psychologists of the highest scientific reputation have been actively connected with the society. The purpose of the organization was to make a thorough examination of the facts at the bottom of clairvoyance, telepathy, spiritualism, and similar phenomena, and to publish in its *Proceedings* the results of this rigid scientific inquiry. Public attention was particularly drawn to the protracted and careful experiments of Professor Hyslop with the medium Mrs. Piper. After taking every possible precaution, and after employing every other possible hypothesis to explain the communications made through the medium, Professor Hyslop was

¹ One of the most striking examples of this new attitude is found in PROFESSOR JAMES'S treatise, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The non-theological purpose of the book is seen in the subtitle, "A Study in Human Nature." Professor James has deliberately collected unusual and extreme examples of religious experience, because he feels that he can find in intense experiences clearer indications of the place which religion occupies in the soul's life than can be obtained from the more colorless average ideas of men concerning religion. If the purpose of his psychology were to gain accurate knowledge of external reality, it would be of great importance to stick close to that which all men may verify. But if (as is the case) he is aiming merely to show the values which man expresses in his religious life, these values are more clearly perceived when the intensity of the religious experience causes all subsidiary considerations to drop out of consciousness.

finally shut up to the conclusion that he had actually communicated with his dead father, and had received answers from the spirit world. Mr. F. W. H. Meyers, the prominent English essayist, after reviewing the work of the society, declares his belief that it is scientifically demonstrated that those whom we call dead are alive, and that they can communicate with us under proper conditions.

Here seems to be a realm where psychology can render direct confirmation of one of the central doctrines of Christianity—*i. e.*, the belief in a continued personal existence after death. Indeed, Professor Hyslop expressed some impatience with the lukewarm attitude of most ministers of the gospel when scientific evidence of immortality was offered them. But this lukewarmness was the instinctive expression of the fundamental difference between the message of science and the message of religion. Science proceeds to put us into intellectual contact with *facts*, in order that we may form rational conclusions on the basis of these facts. Religion proceeds to put us into personal contact with *God*, in order that, having experienced his presence in our lives, we may have moral convictions as to God's eternal providence for his children. It would be quite possible for one to believe in a future life on the basis of such facts as are established by the Society for Psychical Research, and yet have no personal communion with God. Why should not an atheist assent to Mr. Meyers's conclusion, if he were satisfied with the evidence? It was the instinctive recognition of the religious barrenness of the rationalistic inferences of Professor Hyslop which led Christian ministers to stand aloof. The Christian belief in a future life is not a probable inference from observed facts, but a moral conviction inherent in one's experience of God's loving providence. This moral conviction is possible for all who surrender in faith to the God of our salvation. The evidence which the Society for Psychical Research offers is, on the contrary, available only for a few. The majority of men would be dependent upon a priesthood of "Mrs. Pipers" for their belief. Thus, to put the conclusions of this society into the foreground would be to repeat the ideal of gnosticism in another form; to assert the existence of esoteric truth accessible only to the favored few, which the majority of men must accept on the authority of their deliverances. The only positive use which can be made of the evidence drawn from spiritualism

is to frame an *ad hominem* argument against the man who, appealing to "science," denies the possibility of a future life.

Of much more practical interest to religious teachers is a line of investigation which has recently been pursued with great zeal in this country. Ten years or more ago, President G. Stanley Hall conceived the plan of a psychological investigation of the religious experiences to be observed in our ordinary church life. Under his direction, various students of the phenomena of religious experience have been gathering data (usually obtained by the questionnaire method), and a considerable literature on the subject is now accessible.²

The sort of information which these recent publications seek to lay before us is indicated by the following titles of chapters in Professor Starbuck's book, *The Psychology of Religion*: "The Age of Conversion," "The Motives and Forces Leading to Conversion," "The Mental and Bodily Affections Immediately Accompanying Conversion," "The Conscious and Subconscious Elements in Conversion," "The Character of the New Life," "The Religion of Childhood," "Substitutes for Religious Feeling," etc. Equally suggestive chapter titles may be cited from Professor James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "Religion and Neurology," "The Reality of the Unseen," "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness," "The Sick Soul," "The Divided Self, and the Process of its Unification," "Conversion," "Saintliness," "Mysticism," etc.

It is evident that this new approach to the subject of religious experience possesses elements of great attractiveness. To some men, doubtless, the empirical and questioning attitude toward subjects which have been regarded as fixed and sacred will seem sacrilegious. Occasionally we meet with a man who sees no difference between this secular examination of the content of Christianity and the secular criticism of a Voltaire. But there is a radical difference. Voltaire was engaged in a rationalistic criticism of the *doctrines* of Christianity. Modern psychologists, on the contrary, are not concerned primarily

² PROFESSOR LEUBA has published several significant articles in the *American Journal of Psychology*. The most important recent books are PROFESSOR STARBUCK'S *The Psychology of Religion*, PROFESSOR GRANGER'S *The Soul of a Christian*, PROFESSOR COE'S *The Spiritual Life*, and *The Religion of a Mature Mind*, PROFESSOR JAMES'S *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and PRESIDENT HALL'S *Adolescence*. President Hall's ideal has at length taken tangible form in the newly established *American Journal of Religious Psychology and Education*, of which he is editor.

with doctrines. They are studying the religious life itself. Their work consists not in a destructive criticism of dogma, but in an attempt to find just what vital meaning religious experience has in the life of the soul. They are distinctly friendly in their attitude. They take the testimony of a religious man at its face value, unless compelled critically to modify it. It is taken for granted that religious beliefs and impulses are genuine psychological facts.

The test which the new psychology imposes upon the beliefs which it meets is quite different from the test which theology has traditionally employed. For the theologian the question of the *origin* of beliefs has been of supreme importance: Can a given doctrine be traced to Scripture? The psychologist asks a more practical question: What significance does a given belief have in the soul-life of the individual? The orthodoxy or the philosophical validity of religious beliefs is not a matter of much importance to the psychologist. He merely attempts to show how the soul-life of a man who holds certain convictions differs from the soul-life of one who does not hold them. If, now, the psychologist can assure us that our personal life is richer and more complete when we pass through religious experience, he has vindicated that experience from the standpoint of culture. A new apologetic may be constructed on the basis of this practical consideration.

The content of this class of books is much less striking than the reports of the Society for Psychical Research, for instead of dealing with unusual psychic manifestations they set forth testimonies which are entirely familiar to anyone who attends prayer-meetings. Dr. A. A. Berle, in a recent article in the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, has shown that practically all of the "new" psychological discoveries have been known and put into the service of religion by efficient pastors and evangelists from time immemorial. This is no doubt true. But it is a task well worth achieving to make accessible to all religious teachers the facts of the spiritual life which, alas! have too often been unknown save by men of special insight. Grammar and rhetoric had been known and put into practice by men long before the sophists in ancient Greece began to correlate and to teach these principles. But the world owes to the sophists a great debt because they made it possible for men who had been inefficient in their practical relations to their fellows to learn the secret of efficiency. So these recent

investigations into the characteristics of religious experience may help pastors and teachers to employ suitable methods with children or with young people, and may show what part temperament and nervous condition may play in the concrete expression of religious aspirations. A wider sympathy with different types of men will result, and stereotyped notions concerning the exact course which religious experience must take will be broken up.

Another service which may be rendered by the new psychology grows out of its truer appreciation of the place which the intellect occupies in our practical life. If doctrine is only one result of the activity of the human spirit, then a technical criticism of doctrine on rationalistic grounds is a very shallow performance. Let me quote a passage on this point from Professor James:

If we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial. It is the part that has the *prestige* undoubtedly, for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.³

This statement makes clear the fact which every pastor knows—*i. e.*, that purity and profundity of religious beliefs are not necessarily coextensive with philosophical acuteness. To believe in God, in the reality of communion with him, in the certainty of an immortal life, in the supreme significance of Jesus Christ for the soul of man—these beliefs are not the product of reasoning so much as of a devoted life of trust and love. The humble Christian may by the very power of his inner spiritual life have arrived at convictions more profound than those reached by any process of demonstration. The intellect tests and criticises; it does not create the content of faith.

Let us, then, note briefly the chief points in which recent psychological research touches the realm of religion:

³ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 73.

1. The Society for Psychical Research has given scientific standing to spiritual phenomena which suggest the existence of a realm of reality transcending that of ordinary experience.

2. It is a fact accepted by scientific psychologists that religious experience is just as real and just as significant as any other sort of experience. The rationalistic attempt to show that such experience is illusion may be called antiquated.

3. The most precious elements of human experience are built upon the affections and the will rather than predominantly upon the intellect. Religious experience is engendered and cultivated by arousing emotion and will rather than by exact acquaintance with doctrine.

4. This means that such attacks upon Christianity as those emanating from the late Colonel Ingersoll are psychologically absurd. Since religion is not a secondary product of argumentation, but is rather a primary experience of the soul, its existence does not depend upon skilful dialectic, and it cannot be destroyed by criticism of its doctrines.

5. The function of the intellect is to give more concrete and definite expression to the soul-life which is prior to such expression. Theology is thus an imperative need of the religious soul. But when a theology meets with the protests of the religious nature, it becomes a burden, no matter how cogently it may appeal to authority or to reason. A theology is vital and true, not so much when it attempts to demonstrate objective truths as when it seeks to formulate in an intelligible way those deep-rooted convictions concerning God, and the soul's life in relation to God, which form the heart of religious experience.

6. It follows from the principles of the new psychology that if the source of religious experience is not to be found predominantly in theological doctrines, neither is it to be found in psychological research. If in preaching or teaching one is solely concerned with demonstrable propositions, be such propositions statements of logic, or of history, or of psychology, one is failing to reach the real source of religious life. That source is God. The task of the Christian preacher is not to set forth a psychology of religion, but to understand the spiritual facts which this psychology makes clear, and to use the knowledge thus gained to aid him in more efficient guidance of the religious life to its divine source.